

# BEYOND PROMISE:

## Autobiography and Multicultural Education

Hongyu Wang & Tianlong Yu

### Introduction

In studying the politics of identity, we find that who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as to whom we have been and want to become. (William F. Pinar, 2004, p. 30)

Autobiography is not an unequivocally empowering medium but a contradictory form of cultural politics that has both progressive and reactionary forms. (Wendy S. Hesford, 1999, p. xxiv)

Reading and writing autobiography as a pedagogical mode of engaging multicultural education is no longer new. We also adopt this strategy in our own respective teachings at two universities where students are predominantly White and (lower) middle-class women.

We each use two autobiographical works: one is the highly celebrated *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by the renowned African-American poet and novelist Maya Angelou (2000/1975), which narrates an uplifting journey of a Black girl who rose above racism, sexism, and poverty to achieve her dream; the other is *Invisible Privilege: A Memoir about Race, Class, &*

*Gender* by a Jewish, (upper) middle-class woman, Paula Rothenberg (2000), a noted scholar in women's studies and multicultural studies, who writes about her difficult journey of understanding White privilege and choosing to fight against social injustices and inequities.

These two books depict the lived experiences of two individuals who took on the task of fighting for social justice, albeit with distinctly different paths. The promise of using both books was to engage our students with their own identity politics as educators. Our experiences in teaching them, however, question such a promise because many students refused to read them in a way that would interrogate their own identities.

As Goodson (1998) points out, storytelling itself is not necessarily empowering but can be implicated in reproducing dominant discourses and structures. Reflecting upon our teaching stories, we intend to address the contradictions of using autobiography in multicultural education and envision new discourses for a transformative pedagogy.

Our adoption of an autobiographical approach in teaching multiculturalism was motivated by our efforts to go beyond the dominant approach to multicultural education, what James Banks (1991) would call a "contributions approach" or "heroes and holidays approach," which emphasizes teaching ethnic differences and cultural tolerance. While celebrating inclusion and stressing sensitivity training, such an approach fails to adequately

analyze power relationships and leaves structural injustice and inequities unchallenged. Moreover, it is an essentialist model as it tends to define identities in static and fixed terms, failing to grasp the dynamic, complex, and changing nature of ethnic/racial/cultural identity. In addition, it tends to focus on making students aware of "others," not touching upon who they are as gendered, raced, and classed persons.

Disrupting such a promise, we shift our focus to the intersection between structure and person to examine identity issues: How is personal identity constructed socially, economically, and politically? Autobiography, when written and taught in such a way that the self is situated in social and cultural contexts, seems to be an excellent medium for engaging such work.

Ironically, our efforts to challenge the promise of the additive multicultural education approach through the focus on identity also leave us in an unsettling pedagogical process. Using autobiography to engage students with lived experiences turns out to be yet another promise with both possibilities and limitations. It is on this site of beyond double "promises" that we reflect, complicate, and re-situate multicultural pedagogy.

In this article, we not only reflect on our own teaching approaches, we also attempt to understand how teaching autobiographical works has influenced our own identities as teachers. Both of us are Chinese working at American universities as international faculty members. While one is male and the other is female, we also

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come from somewhat different theoretical backgrounds: Tianlong Yu is more embedded in critical pedagogy while Hongyu Wang takes more of a poststructuralist autobiographical approach. Despite these differences, we share a commitment to social justice and equity which requires both structural change and personal transformation.

In what follows, we start with each other's reflections on teaching two autobiographies, showing our respective paths and our struggles. These reflections are followed by a "conversation" in which we talk about our own subjectivity-in-making influenced by our teaching. We conclude this writing with an invitation of engaging autobiography in multicultural education as a difficult pedagogical task which destabilizes both teacher's and students' taken-for-granted worlds.

### Reflections on Teaching

[Bakhtin] imagines the self as a conversation, often a struggle, of discrepant voices with each other, voices (and words) speaking from different positions and invested with different degrees and kinds of *authority*. (Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, 1990, p. 218)

#### Tianlong Yu's Reflection

In our first class meeting, my students spoke about their notions of multiculturalism and multicultural education. In the minds of many students, this class is about "culture." It is about multiple cultures, or ethnic differences. Isn't it? They were genuinely puzzled why a class on culture has to deal with issues of gender, class, or sexuality (it was relatively easier for them to understand that race should be an issue).

It did not take me long to sense how big the gap was between what I intended for the course and what my students expected from it (seemingly a common scenario experienced by teacher educators teaching multicultural education courses. For example, see Abidah and Teel, 2000). The additive approach is not only usually taught by instructors but also often expected by students.

In addition, the predominant job-preparation orientation of teacher education programs, especially in traditionally certification-oriented programs like the ones I teach in, is hardly helpful in developing an identity-based, critical, multicultural education approach. Obsessed with "content methods" or "teaching strategies" and viewing teacher education largely in terms of skills development and techniques training, students are seemingly

not motivated to engage themselves in critical reflections on racism, sexism, and classism. The current emphasis on standards and high-stakes testing in national educational policy undoubtedly promotes this clinical orientation in teacher education and undermines the critical task of multicultural education.

Against this difficult context complicated by students' unwillingness and unpreparedness for the course issues, I struggled to construct a critical and affirming pedagogy with my students, one that, as Peter McLaren (2003) envisions, empowers us to tell stories, author meanings, and shape voices. A "working from within" (Pinar, 1994) approach was emphasized as I reminded my students in the beginning that this class is really not about our students; rather, it is about us as teachers. We must analyze and challenge our own perceptions, attitudes, and understandings as both persons and educators towards diversity issues, and improve our skills as practitioners accordingly. We are embarking on a journey to examine the formation of our own identities and engage in a conversation with others.

We first read Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Deeply moved by her unyielding struggle against all odds in a ruthlessly racist society and her eventual hard-earned triumph, I was surprised by the comment from one of my female students: "The book is just so-so: it doesn't meet my expectation. Nothing stands out." Before I could give any response, another gentleman added, "Black struggle, again. Haven't we heard enough?"

I was quickly thrown into a reality: Angelou's story is largely irrelevant to some of these White women and men. I naturally wondered if they had similar reactions upon reading any of the "Great Books" in the canon, such as those of Shakespeare or Hemingway, which indeed dominated their high school and university literature courses. Different readers may always have different understandings of the same book; yet, how does the issue of race play a role here? Or, does it play a role?

These students apparently felt uncomfortable, maybe offended, by the stories about the Black and White conflicts, the Black sufferings under White racism, and the Black struggles against social injustice. I didn't expect a uniform understanding of the book from all my students; yet, I wasn't prepared for the apathy and indifference some of the students showed, either. This early surprise reinforced my intention to give them another opportunity to listen to those stories, to read those people's lives.

As Maxine Greene (1997) states,

"Learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform" (p. 519). Understanding my students' lack of exposure and the resulting resistance to the multiple and different perspectives, I insisted that they read and re-read the story: No, we have *not* heard enough; in society at large and in education particularly, the voices of Black and other minority people are still largely silenced. We have a responsibility to listen.

Despite the resistance of some students, overall, the class's reaction to Angelou was positive. Most of the students (female, White, and lower middle class) were moved by the story. During the class discussion they showed their heartfelt sympathies with her sufferings and their admiration for her strengths and success. They saw being poor and being woman as the two largest barriers in Angelou's life journey and they were inspired by the fact that she triumphantly overcame both and achieved a fulfilling life.

Here, issues of gender and class loomed large. A humble woman struggling against gender bias and poverty, Angelou was identified and accepted as one of them; her life was celebrated and admired. She became their role model. Angelou's messages of dedication, hard work, faith, and perseverance found strong repercussions in my students.

I was pleased and puzzled at the same time. My students learned a lot from Angelou but also missed something important. They didn't (or refused to) see "color." They didn't (or refused to) see race. Yet, Angelou's being woman and being poor were inextricably tied to being Black. Being Black was an integral part of her identity. Race relations constituted the determining background of her personal struggle and White racism was essential in causing her suffering. Denying this critical context inevitably caused a partial and problematic understanding of her story.

My students' reading of Angelou echoes Christine Sleeter's (1993) findings about how White teachers construct race. Descendants of European immigrants, White teachers could easily draw on their own family histories to understand how social mobility is achieved in North America. They themselves have attained upward mobility by earning college degrees and becoming teachers. Therefore, both family and personal experiences seem to clearly justify individual dedication and hard work, a message hailed by Angelou, and a "color-blind" approach to race relations.

Failing to see the unequal distribution of power and wealth among racial groups, White teachers unconsciously adopt a psychological view to look at individual lives. Moreover, focusing on their own struggles in life, White teachers fail to recognize the injustice and inequalities racial minorities suffer and the privilege they, as Whites, are born with.

My students' selective acceptance and un-acceptance of certain characters soon reached another level. I was almost shocked by their overwhelming rejection of Paula Rothenberg's book. They were obviously taken by a Black woman's good spirit during hard reality, but turned off by a White woman's constant and explicit harsh criticism of sexism, class domination, and particularly White racism. Their resistance to her definition of racism as "the subordination of people of color by White people" (p. 172) is most significant.

Rothenberg (2001) talks to White people about racism thusly: "I believe that racism is a White problem and that White people have a special responsibility for undoing the damage that has been done in our name and to our advantage" (p. 2). Such a critique of White racism caused considerable frustration, guilt, and denial in my students. As one student wrote: "I would feel guilty for what they went through as a race. Her writing was so powerful it felt like my guilt would be justified because of the color of my skin."

This reflects a typical psychological reaction of my White students confronting the issue of racism. The challenge for them is to see "Whiteness" as a social construct, not a personal trait. They need to see racism as "institutionalized prejudice with a compelling and brutal history" (Rothenberg, 2001, p. 172). And they need to understand that we can possibly eliminate racism only when we start to view racism as a socio-cultural and structural problem (Loewen, 1999).

Viewing racism and other problems such as sexism and homophobia as individual/personal problems instead of social and cultural ills leads students to oppose ideas for social and structural reforms to address those problems, such as the affirmative action policy in college admissions. In objection to it, my students cried "reverse racism." They argued that affirmative action policies discriminate against men and Whites in the name of gender and race equality; that taking away men's and Whites' rights is taking a step back; and that a society must stop trying to correct one wrong with another.

These ideas are indeed well thought out, but the misconceptions and resistance

are evident. We need to ask: Don't those who were oppressed and exploited for so long deserve a little more support now? When Blacks, women, and other minorities were the victims of rampant racism and sexism, when they suffered savage inequalities and brutal injustice, which were perpetuated by powerful Whites and males, who cried out for equality? Certainly not the powerful!

Only when their privileges were challenged, did the powerful begin to embrace equality and justice and cry foul. As Rothenberg (2001) argues convincingly, in order for the underprivileged to truly have an equal opportunity to participate in social affairs, it is necessary to give them preference for a time. And history has shown that it is possible to change the systems and rules that govern human lives and to alter power relations that perpetuate inequalities and injustices (pp.145-146).

It has been quite a struggle to teach and to learn. Resistance, yes; but students also are thinking and rethinking every idea they have been exposed to. My hope for the class is that we have posed some real challenges to ourselves, to the *status quo* in our lives. These challenges call our privileges into question, whether they be ethnic, racial, gendered, or classed, and inevitably question our self identities.

### **Hongyu Wang's Reflection**

As Gilmore (1994) points out, both autobiography and postmodernism are concerned with the contested site of identity and subjectivity while postmodernism challenges any stable, essential notion of the self. Strongly influenced by post-structural theories, I use autobiography in my teaching as the site for complicating students' understandings of self and culture. Reading and writing autobiography can capture the complexity of a person's life in its lively depiction of multiple layers of human experiences, which shows a process of identity-in-making rather than a static picture of the self fixed in any social construction.

Race, gender, class, sexuality, or nationality as discourses and practices are fluid, and, while politically charged, are lived by a concrete person in complex social contexts. Autobiography, when embedded in broad cultural situations, is both intellectually challenging and emotionally appealing for critical self and communal reflections.

The combination of Paula Rothenberg's and Maya Angelou's books evolved from my teaching experiences. Since I teach at a state university and the major-

ity of my students are White women, I hoped that Rothenberg's journey of racial and gendered consciousness could inform students' own journeys. She (2000) states, "I see my primary audience as other White people, and I see my task as using the privilege I am able to draw upon to get a hearing for things that are not always said" (p. 2). When I co-taught a doctoral seminar with a colleague on diversity and equity, I suggested this book for our class.

However, my imagined similarity between students' and Rothenberg's backgrounds did not produce any easy connection but provoked uncomfortable readings among students. Many students saw her as a 1960s radical who did not understand at all what life was really about. But as the class progressed, the book made much more sense and students returned to the book constantly, and quite a few of them reflected upon their initial resistance to "seeing" privileges in their own lives.

The book became the most enlightening text for some students in that class. One of our students mentioned that her struggles with this book were greatly helped by reading another book in another class—Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—and it was the latter book that helped her to understand the notion of privilege. Reading her comments, I became excited about the promise of juxtaposing two books in my teachings, which, I thought, must be an ideal combination for students to approach the world through different angles of *both* self and other.

Now I have used both books for several semesters in our master's program and become more aware of the risks of autobiography despite its promise of engaging students with lived experiences. The relationship between self and other is such a complicated interplay that the privileged site of the self can be reinforced rather than interrogated through teaching autobiography.

I usually use Angelou's book first, hoping that a different world in which a Black girl's struggles and coming of age is narrated under the racist social contexts of her time could open up for students a world they may not be familiar with. Such an engagement with the other through the voice of the other is a necessary step to see the self differently. While leading them out to other people's worlds, I also intend to lead them back to understand the self through reading Rothenberg's book. After understanding others, one can re-enter the self with a fuller critical edge.

However, my arrangement is disrupted by many students' heartfelt celebration of Angelou's enchanting autobiography



accompanied by their utter resistance to Rothenberg's radical encounter with privilege. In this simultaneous warm reception and angry rejection, individualism rather than cultural construction of selfhood is reinforced.

If Angelou could achieve so much with her strength, humor, and stigma, *despite* racism; if Rothenberg experienced so much privilege from her class and race but still whined about her gender, who would be sympathetic with a spoiled girl who kept complaining? What matters, after all, is one's ability to live one's own life, my students comment.

While reading these two books is required, writing autobiographical experiences is not required. Many students, though, provoked by the autobiographical prose, in their written responses to these two books, write autobiographically. Ironically, despite the dramatic differences between their backgrounds and Maya Angelou's, many of them wrote about their similarity to her.

While as women, we do share a lot of experiences cross culturally, what is disappointing to me is that Maya Angelou's racial otherness is assimilated into the sameness. An important aspect of her life is that it was heavily impacted by racism. However, although this shocked students on the one hand, it was marginalized in their eagerness to find similarities between different lives.

Such is the danger of empathy, a notion that both Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas urge us to go beyond in their calling for the respect for the otherness of the other. In the attempt to empathize with the other, an irreplaceable element of the unknown in the other is lost; in such an assimilation of the other into the self, the newness of the other disappears. Students quietly turned away from "the surprise of the other" (Edgerton, 1996) offered by a woman like Angelou who suffered from racism, leaving the privileged site of Whiteness disturbed a bit but unchanged.

For many mainstream American students, reading the successful stories of minority models is comforting; however, reading about the painful struggles of another person sharing White skin is unbearable. Rothenberg's assertion that "in the world in which I lived, human beings had no race—which is to say—they were White" (2000, p. 9) mirrors the lives many of my students have had as they grew up in predominantly White rural communities.

However, they quickly dismiss her struggle with her racial identity and fiercely refuse her claim that racism is a White problem which calls for White people

to deal with it. Rothenberg's challenge is a challenge to the stability of their own sense of the self, a challenge which requires an element of "self-shattering" (Pinar, 2004) if it is confronted and answered.

I would like to argue—I usually do so in the class—that acknowledging others' suffering does not negate our own suffering but expands our ability to feel and connect. Acknowledging one's own privileged layer of the self does not negate our own goodness but challenges us to understand the impact of the self on other people's lives. While it is relatively easy to be sympathetic from a distance with another person who suffered a great deal in life, "to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront" (Boiler, 1997, p. 263) is utterly painful. In this sense, multicultural education is not so much about Others (Banks, 1999) as it is about Self and the entangled relationship between self and other.

The differences in social class between Rothenberg and my students did play a role in their negative responses to the book, as they could not see how such a "White" woman, who enjoyed so much social-economic privilege, has anything to do with them. Just as students' alignment with Angelou's book is through (underprivileged) woman's eyes, my students' lower middle class status and rural background makes them refuse to see into the mirror of racial privilege. While their flight from confronting the issues of race needs to be disrupted, their experiences through their own gender and class need to be validated and respected.

While my intention to make students look into the mirror of both self and other failed, I also question my own pedagogical desire in this attempt: does not students' resistance show that multiplicity of identity and intersections of race, class, and gender makes the claim for social justice ambiguous? Their refusal to see the sameness in the mirror of Whiteness and their refusal to see the differences in the mirror of gender challenge the very notion of the "mirror," a notion that Jacques Derrida (1991) problematizes.

As Betty Bergland (1994) points out, the relationship between discourse and the subject is not an easy one: the efforts to search for "representative voices" (or images—in the metaphor of mirror) no longer can sustain the challenge of a postmodern subject which is not unitary or essentialist. There is no "one true story" (Miller, 2005) to tell. There is no one version of being White, or being Black.

Only in acknowledging the contradictory, multiple, and shifting site of identity

can we make specific and contextualized modes of resistance possible (Foucault, 1978). After all, Angelou's and Rothenberg's stories have demonstrated the complexity and fluidity of identity. In this sense, the gap between the instructor's intention and students' own meaning-making in identifying and dis-identifying can be turned into a productive site in which both student and teacher reach beyond themselves to journey, together yet on different paths.

The complicated dynamics of self and other in teaching through autobiography in multicultural education is imbued with power relationships. While Wendy S. Hesford (1999) is concerned with how to turn this site into an empowering experience for marginalized students, I intend to address the circulation of power more from understanding the racially privileged students, as I believe they are also major transformative forces.

The difficulty in destabilizing one's long-cherished identity is also implicated in its fragility. Our work as multicultural educators is to be willing to lead students and ourselves to the limit so that transformation can happen at the moment when we are open to our own vulnerability. The very difficulty that students have experienced sometimes leads them to understand how their own identities have to be risked and renewed in order to engage social change.

In Bakhtin's (1984) terms, when polyphony is introduced into the process of conversing with the self, creativity in inventing selfhood can be released. Reading, writing, and teaching autobiography itself may not be empowering, but our pedagogical attention to the interaction between students and texts informs and further makes possible a transformative process of disrupting the *status quo* and leading to the creation of new subjectivities.

### A Conversation on Teacher's Identity

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (Parker Palmer, 1998, p. 2)

Teaching multicultural education through identity politics also puts educators' own subjectivity at the edge. Good autobiographies usually evoke strong responses from readers, whether positive or negative, or both. Mediating class discussions loaded by strong emotions, the teacher cannot engage such a pedagogical process without also working on her or his own feelings and identifications. As

international faculty members, we struggle with making sense of our own lives in a cross-cultural and multi-cultural educational setting.

What follows is our conversation about how teaching makes us rethink our own national, gendered, social, and classed identities. This is an ongoing process that is always open to new ways of understanding, so we use the format of conversing to show the fluidity of identity construction. Engaging identity politics through autobiography, teachers may have to interrogate their own identities many times along the way.

**HONGYU:** Reading Mary Doll's book (1996) and her reflection on first being a nice girl and then being a nice teacher brings a revelation to me. What she describes about her encounter with an obnoxious male college student is also my imagined nightmare as I encounter "American maleness" in my own multicultural education classes.

I have never reached the point she did when she finally could not put up with him anymore and just blew up, but that is my ultimate fear. I am afraid that one day I will be just like her; after all the smiles, elusive answers, gentle questions to deflect students' aggression, I will suddenly release my frustrations right in front of every student and become, yes, a "bad" woman in the public eyes.

I have managed to slip through the hierarchical system in China by being a nice girl yet with excellent academic records, a cultural and gendered construction which supported my success in the public world. This success simultaneously reinforces (being nice) and disrupts (being intelligent) the gendered norm.

Teaching multicultural education, more than any other class, however, no longer allows me a space to be *both* nice *and* intelligent. My pedagogical, intellectual, and moral position of anti-racism, anti-(hetero)sexism, and anti-classism requires me to be assertive and to be comfortable with confrontations. Being nice no longer comes in handy. With the realization of my own niceness both socially and self-imposed, may I learn to allow the assertive and aggressive part of the self to come forward in a less violent way? What is your story, Tianlong? What have the experiences of teaching this class taught you about yourself?

**TIANLONG:** Teaching this class made me more aware that being Asian is part of my identity. It is interesting for me to

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realize how students consistently saw me as a person and educator in terms of my racial and ethnic background even though they proclaimed that they held "color-blind" approaches to human relations. Whenever we reached a disagreement over course issues, they drew reference to the fact that I was different from them and they were aware that our difference lay mainly in the fact that I am Asian and they are White. They acknowledged that my being Asian had significantly affected my worldview and lifestyle; yet they were slow to understand how much they may also have been deeply situated in Whiteness.

What I did was to purposefully draw on my own ethnic background to parallel the stories of Angelou and Rothenberg and give students another chance to look at race and ethnicity as they are lived and to understand and challenge their (and my) own situated identities. Responding to the equal opportunity myth in America uncritically embraced by many of my students, I discussed my personal encounter with racial discrimination in the job market and how my struggle had affected my identity.

I told them a naming paradox I experienced. Exactly because of the racial discrimination I experienced and I was afraid would happen (I was aware of the University of Chicago and MIT study about how resumes with White-sounding names received more responses from prospective employers than those with same credentials but non-White names), at one time I wanted to change my Chinese name into an English one.

That was quite an agonizing experience as I was in a dilemma. I didn't want to give up the name my parents gave me and all of their expectations behind it; yet I didn't want my foreign name to turn people off in the job market and become an inhibiting factor in my new career and life in America. Sometimes I thought I should take an English name just to go with the established norms and rules in America

(as many foreigners have already done here). That could be one way I show my respect for this culture I have embraced (I am sympathetic to many Americans who have tremendous difficulties pronouncing my Chinese name). On the other hand, however, I wondered how much I must sacrifice to be accepted into the mainstream and why I have to contribute to the stubborn mentality that undermines true inclusion and diversity.

I was compelled to recognize the existence of multiple identities and their contextual construction in my own life. I realized how much I need to *play* my identity *painfully* in a foreign place I yearn to call home. My naming dilemma put me in a struggle for visibility, acceptance, and inner balance and harmony as well. By the way, the reaction of my close American friends to my thought of name changing was most interesting. They strongly opposed the idea, saying that they accept me for who and what I am, but they seemed to ignore my struggle in a racist society where names still bear high stakes that influence individuals' lives.

As for today, I'm still undecided. While teaching multiculturalism, I have been compelled to tell my stories and live my struggles again and again. I am just hoping that along with this process, I am strengthening my self-knowledge about who I am and what kind of person I am becoming.

**HONGYU:** This is amazing! Names are an essential part of identity: how we name ourselves and how others name us influence the way we perceive the world and are perceived by others. Remember the story that Angelou tells about how her White boss refused to call her by her own name but made up a name for her? Her victory in getting her name back was hilarious for my students.

The invisibility of being an Asian has been a constant struggle for many people. Sometimes I wonder whether there is a gendered plot in such an

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invisibility which often implies inferiority. The images of Chinese men and many times Chinese-American men, in the popular fantasy of the American media, are usually “feminine,” weak, not manly enough while on the other hand macho martial arts masters who are good at killing also appear, perhaps as an overcompensated image (Eng, 2001). Both are not really true to the everyday life of many Chinese men. Ironically, the best part of Chinese martial arts novels is about wisdom and how to achieve the balance of *yin* and *yang*, rather than the media portrayal of violence. Chinese men can be highly patriarchal in their quiet, reserved way, too.

With the feminization of Chinese men, the image of Chinese women is the ultimate weak sex, perhaps, to use William Pinar’s (2004) *currere* analysis, a projection of a split, repudiated, denied element of the American self to achieve “true” manhood. While it is far from reality—the strength of Chinese women has sustained Chinese civilization (Wang, in press)—I do feel this projection from my students, especially in multicultural education classes.

While I am much less aggressive than my White women colleagues, students’ anger with encountering difficult knowledge circulates more violently back to me, once in a while, in such a manner that I feel that they want to put me “back in my place.” Do they also, perhaps more unconsciously, expect me to be the sweet, docile Chinese woman in teaching that is envisioned here in the United States?

When we talk about pedagogical relationships, we usually pay attention to the influence of the teacher on the student in terms of power relationships. What intrigues me now is the question about what influences students can have on the teacher. Especially in multicultural education, more often than not, teachers come from minority backgrounds. Teaching has asked me to come to terms with what it means to be both a Chinese and a woman.

**TIANLONG:** I agree with you and I believe my students have profoundly influenced me, personally and professionally. They are the active players in my subjectivity in the making as they have taught me as much as I have taught them. As stated earlier, I came to teach this class with a clear social justice orientation. Like you, I also define myself as an anti-racist, anti-(hetero)sexist, and anti-classist educator, and I believed my positions and stances regarding these critical issues are non-negotiable. After teaching this class, I am still firm about my beliefs, but I also have begun to wonder if anything is really non-negotiable and if social justice itself is constructed.

Teaching this course has pushed me to investigate my own life journey, my politics, and my orientations as an educator. I have realized how my international journey from China to the U.S. has particularly made me aware of social inequalities and injustice and how this awareness has caused both insights and constraints in my thinking. Born and raised in a remote rural area, I experienced firsthand the effects of poverty. I learned, first, to accept and then to challenge the scarcity of our material life and developed a consciousness of social classes.

Such consciousness has colored my overall approach to education. Focusing on class division and the resulting social inequities, I tend to adopt a structural analysis and dismiss the psychological view that explains individual success or failure. My students once used me as an example to support the popular conservative theory that individual motivation and effort are what matters to succeed in a free land of equal opportunity.

As an Asian, born poor, having overcome many barriers during a long cross-cultural journey to become a professional in highly competitive academia, I apparently served as a “model minority.” I furiously rejected this ostensibly positive label. With the total rejection, however, I also left

aside a balanced analysis of the dynamic and complex relations between individual and society. After reading and especially listening to students’ positive responses to Angelou’s story, I now realize how important it is to respect and encourage personal dedication and hard work in an adverse social environment. Human resilience, strengths, and faith, as Angelou and many others have demonstrated, are indeed what support individuals struggling for social justice and equity.

Moreover, I have come to understand how my “situatedness” as a teacher has affected my teaching. I used to take for granted this part of my identity and subconsciously looked at my students through this fixed lens. I think that is why I often became frustrated while teaching. When I begin to challenge my own politics and resistance, I understand my students’ better. And a willingness to understand students in turn helps me continue to look into myself.

No one is freed from particular conditioning. We are all individuals, “individuals who are part of classes, are gendered, raced, have assumed specific choices in their sexuality, profess specific religious creeds, beliefs, and understandings” (McLaren & Torres, 1998, p. 198). And as teacher educators, we must understand, as Maxine Greene (1992) does, “the teacher as questioner, as beginner, someone caught in wonderment and uncertainty, reaching beyond to choose and know.... Teacher’s renewal is equally, wonderfully incomplete; there is always, always more” (p.viii).

With this new understanding and appreciation in mind, I realize that the renewal, for both students and the teacher, is forever an ongoing process.

### **An Incomplete Conclusion**

Indeed, it is an ongoing process. We intend to challenge the dominant approach of multicultural education through shifting the pedagogical focus to the issue of identity, which is situated between self and culture. Yet our teachings tell us that using autobiography as a way of engaging multicultural education at a deeper level than the superficial additive approach does not necessarily fulfill its promise.

Pedagogical efforts must be made to lead students into the complex interaction between social structure and individual identity and between self and other so that



both personal and social transformation can possibly be achieved. In the process, we have also shown how we shifted our own positions to meet our students without compromising our shared commitment to social justice, equity, and democratization of both self and culture. Our collaboration on this writing itself is a process of accepting and working with our differences between each other while enhancing our mutual understanding.

As May Paomay Tung (2000) insightfully points out, "to write about the interactions of individual lives and their cultural background is like trying to find a beginning and an end of a sphere: There is none" (p. 2). Teaching is like that too. Our entrance points may not be the same, as Tianlong Yu focuses more on the structure due to his critical pedagogy orientation while Hongyu Wang focuses more on the person due to her poststructural autobiographical orientation.

However we do not stay at one point on the spectrum but move towards the complicated interaction in the middle. As we converse, talk, and learn from each other, we come to realize that perhaps there is no definite beginning or end. Wherever one starts, as long as the interactive dynamics between person and structure and between self and other can be *kept* instead of abandoned, one is open to the creative potential of an intertwining, evolving, and transforming process engaging both self and culture.

This process of teaching, conversing, and writing does not offer any resolution or formula for teaching multicultural education, as we have learned that there is no discourse or practice inherently liberatory or empowering, but our pedagogical desires, discourses, and practices are complicated along the way to reach new possibilities. So this essay offers a provocation and an invitation for multicultural educators to be on the path of going beyond any promise to open up alternative paths. Let the conclusion of this essay circle back to our ongoing journey...

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